

The Real Story of Paul Bunyan

Paul's actions against the hated British quickly grew to legendary proportions and spread throughout the Canadian Logging Camps. The war tales of this Canadian Paul Bunyon eventually found their way South of the border as lumberjacks moved from one camp to another.

But it was in the American Camps where Paul's Tales came into their own. With little to do on those long winter nights, the jacks often entertained themselves by setting around the bunkhouse stove telling logging stories. Almost every logger knew a jack who could out saw, out chop, out talk, out roll a log or climb a tree faster than any other logger alive. Over the years the tales slowly switched from Paul's deeds in battle, to deeds of logging. The French-Canadian spelling of Bunyon was slowly Americanized to Bunyan.

Like any gathering of fishermen or hunters, the stories grew a little with each retelling. A mythical logging camp was created for Paul as well as a host of loggers to work in the camp. Paul became an inventor, an orator and even a diplomat, all rolled into one. It seemed the more impossible the job became, the more it became a job for Paul Bunyan. The logger who could do it all!

By the late 1880's and early 1890's, evidence suggests that the Paul Bunyan Tales had spread to most of the logging camps in North America. Paul had finally reached legendary status, at least in the logging camps. Yet among the general public, Paul Bunyan was almost unheard of.

James MacGillivray is credited with writing the first of the Logging Tall Tales that appeared in publication. The untitled tale appeared in the July 24, 1910 edition of the Detroit News - Tribune and was one that MacGillivray had heard a few years earlier while working in a Michigan Logging camp. The tale was about a spring log drive to the sawmill. On the way to the mill the loggers passed a number of empty logging camps. Before long they realizing that the river was shaped like a donut and that they had passed only one camp, their own!

It was 1914 before a Tall Tale again appeared in print in two different publications. The first Tale was a revision of the Detroit News - Tribune story co-authored by James MacGillivray and Douglas Malloch. The revised tale now titled, " The Round River Drive" was written in poetic verse and appeared in the lumber trade journal "The American Lumberman" Magazine.

The second 1914 tale, titled " Introducing Mr. Paul Bunyan of Westwood, California" appeared in a Red River Lumber Company advertising pamphlet. The company sold lumber to local lumberyards through a national network of distributors. The Company was headquartered in Minneapolis and for a time had many logging and mill operations throughout Minnesota. Most of Red Rivers Logging operations had been moved to the West Coast by 1914.

The First of a series of Red River Pamphlets introduced Paul Bunyan and the companies line of "Paul Bunyan White Pine Lumber". The Red River Paul Bunyan resembled more of a Pillsbury Doughboy type figure with a mustache than the typical muscular, bearded image of Paul Bunyan that many of us are familiar with today. The company distributed the pamphlets to it's distributors free of charge.

The 1914 pamphlet had limited success as many found their way into the wastebaskets of the buyers for local distributors and lumberyards. Some believed that a Red River Salesman named Paul Bunyan would be calling on them. In 1916, a second Paul Bunyan Pamphlet was distributed and again received only limited success. In 1922 the third Red River Pamphlet was released. It was an instant success and launched Paul Bunyan's rise to legendary, international fame.

The Red River pamphlets were the brainchild of William B. Laughead who worked in the company,s office. In the early 1900's Laughead had worked in the logging camps around Bemidji, Minnesota. For the Pamphlets, Laughead drew from his own imagination, his experiences in the logging camps and the tales he heard there. He is credited with naming Babe, Paul's Big Blue Ox and Johnny Inkslinger, Paul's famous clerk.

The company sporadically released other issues of the Paul Bunyan Pamphlet until the company went out of business in the 1940's. Neither Laughead nor the Red River Lumber Company copyrighted the pamphlets, or the stories within them. Red River did however trademark both their image of Paul Bunyan and the "Paul Bunyan White Pine".

In 1924, Esther Shephard published a collection of Paul Bunyan Tall Tales. The following year, James Stevens released a collection of Bunyan Stories. The Stevens Tales are among the best known, but are the least faithful to the original logging camp tales. About this time the Bunyan Tall Tales were quickly changing from the tales of the hardy lumberjacks and their tough life in the logging camps to children's stories.

By the 1930's many towns, cities and states were seeking ways to capitalize on Paul's growing popularity. Paul Bunyan festivals, celebrations, statues, tourist attractions and related activities sprung up all across the country. Since the late 1920's, hundreds if not a thousand books about Paul Bunyan and his Tall Takes have been published. Paul Bunyan, Babe and his mythical logging crew had become household names and had finally reached Legendary American Folk Hero Status.

http://paulbunyanscenicbyway.org/The_Real_Story_of_Paul_Bunyan